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A HOMILY BY MOSES BAR CEPHA

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INTRODUCTION

The author of this homily, Moses bar Cepha, better known under his acquired name of Severus, is a familiar Jacobite character in the Christian church in Syria. Born in the village of Meshad al-Kohail on the Tigris about 813 A. D., he was one of the most voluminous writers of Syriac literature, having written commentaries on the entire Old and New Testaments, disputations against heresies, a treatise on the soul, numerous sermons and homilies, and discourses on all the feasts of the church.

We have here the text¹ and translation of one of these homilies, catalogued in Vol. CCVI of the *Manuscripts orientaux*, H. Zotenburg, 1874, copied in the summer of 1905 in the Bibliotheque Nationale. This is a specimen of the later Syriac; the repeated recurrence of the ܐܘܪܝܬܐ and ܐܘܪܝܬܐ, as well as the not infrequent use of Greek words, and the long-drawn-out protases and apodoses betray Greek influence and also the effort on the part of the author to lend a dignity fitting his great theme. The great number of philosophical and logical premises are also examples of the assimilation of the Greek form of thought with an entire lack of its content. As to the subject-matter, one must say, as did Renan long ago, the predominant characteristic of the Syrian is a certain mediocrity. This homily is a fair example of empty phraseology. Obedient to the homiletic rule of all ages, when the preacher has little to say, he quotes Scripture or repeats the same thought in other words. If the form and style of the composition show Greek influence, so the content is perfectly Jewish in nature. The symbolizing and parallelizing of the Talmudic and Rabbinical writings find a counterpart here. It is an example of a style of Bible interpretation which has predominated through all

¹ I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor C. C. Torrey for his corrections of several mistakes in the transcription of the Syriac text and of faulty translations of several passages.

[illegible]

- [100] $\text{כֶּדֶם תָּם בְּנִדָּה} \parallel \text{אֶחָד: שָׁמַי וְעֵלָא} \parallel \text{אֶחָד}$
 $\text{כֶּסֶׁ * סָא תָּם בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: * אֶשְׁרָא תָּם בְּלָא מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 [105] $\text{לְעִמְלִיקָה חִבְּרָא בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה * מַעֲשֵׂה * אֶשְׁרָא מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה. מַעֲשֵׂה סָא אֶשְׁרָא חִבְּרָא כֶּסֶׁ עֵלָא בְּעֵלָא: בְּלָא מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 [110] $\text{לְעִמְלִיקָה. מַעֲשֵׂה חֵא אֶשְׁרָא: אֶשְׁרָא חִבְּרָא כֶּסֶׁ עֵלָא בְּעֵלָא:}$
 $\text{בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה. לָא מַעֲשֵׂה כֶּסֶׁ תָּם בְּלָא מַעֲשֵׂה לְעִמְלִיקָה. סָא}$
 [115] $\text{אֶ, לָא מַעֲשֵׂה לְעִמְלִיקָה: אֶמְלָא מִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה. לְעִמְלָא}$
 $\text{סָא בְּלָא מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה אֶשְׁרָא מַעֲשֵׂה חֵא. מַעֲשֵׂה עֵלָא * אֶשְׁרָא}$
 מַעֲשֵׂה [120] $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה תָּם חֵא עֵלָא מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה: בְּמַעֲשֵׂה סָא מַעֲשֵׂה. מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{כֶּסֶׁ בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּמִנְיָה [125] מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: כֶּסֶׁ בְּלָא מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{לְעִמְלִיקָה: חִבְּרָא כֶּסֶׁ בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה. בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{אֶמְלָא מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה חֵא: מַעֲשֵׂה [130] מַעֲשֵׂה לָא מַעֲשֵׂה חֵא}$
 $\text{אֶשְׁרָא. מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה אֶשְׁרָא: מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{בְּמַעֲשֵׂה לָא מַעֲשֵׂה אֶשְׁרָא בְּמַעֲשֵׂה: אֶשְׁרָא [135] מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה:}$
 $\text{בְּמַעֲשֵׂה סָא מַעֲשֵׂה * מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה אֶשְׁרָא מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה * מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: [140] מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה אֶשְׁרָא}$
 $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה חֵא בְּמִנְיָה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה. אֶשְׁרָא מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה [145] מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה. מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה}$
 $\text{אֶשְׁרָא: מַעֲשֵׂה סָא מַעֲשֵׂה. מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה [150] מַעֲשֵׂה:}$
 $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: אֶשְׁרָא מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה.}$
 $\text{חֵא מַעֲשֵׂה * אֶשְׁרָא מַעֲשֵׂה: מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה: אֶשְׁרָא}$
 $\text{מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה. אֶשְׁרָא מַעֲשֵׂה * [155] מַעֲשֵׂה סָא מַעֲשֵׂה. אֶשְׁרָא}$
 $\text{אֶשְׁרָא לָא מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה. חֵא מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה}$

[illegible]

[illegible]

TRANSLATION

The Birth of John

Words of Moses bar Cepha on "The Birth of John." It is proper that we should investigate a number of things here, and first the question, "What is this pinax which he mentioned?" And some say that these were little, black boards on which one wrote with pencils. Others say that he called here an ordinary tablet a pinax, and others say that he named a writing-tablet a pinax.

A second word: On account of which word of the words which the angel said to Zechariah did he bind his tongue and make dumb his speech, as he said to him, "Thou shalt not be able to speak until these things occur"? Was it then because he said to him, "Elisa-

beth, thy wife, shall bear thee a son"? But see, John was born and Zechariah was more dumb than the fishes. Or was it because of this, "Many shall rejoice in his birth"? But see, the neighbors and relatives rejoiced and Zechariah remained silent still. Or was it because of this, "Until he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit while he is yet in the womb of his mother"? But see, he was filled and he rejoiced, and Zechariah was silent still. Or because of this, "He shall be great before the Lord, and wine and strong drink shall he not drink, and many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God, and he shall go before him in the spirit and in the power of Elias, the prophet, and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children"? And see, the tongue of Zechariah was released, that is, his speech was made free, before these things occurred. And because of which of these words was his tongue imprisoned and his speech made dumb? And we say: "The angel said to him two words both of which Zechariah doubted: One, 'Elisabeth, thy wife, shall bear thee a son;' the other, 'Thou shalt call his name John!'" And Zechariah doubted both these two and he said, "How can a son be to me when I am an old man and my wife is advanced in her days? And if it should occur and be to me, why should I call his name John, which is a strange name in my family?" And it may be known that he doubted both these two from this, that John was born and Zechariah remained dumb still; and from this, that the angel said to him, "From now on shalt thou be dumb," not, "until this thing shall be," which would be a sign of one word, but, "until these things shall be," which is a proof of two words. Therefore it is known that he doubted two things; this, that a son should be born to him, and this, that he should call his name John. If then a man should make objection and should say that these two things are anterior in the order of the Scripture (I mean namely, the one: "She shall bear thee a son," and the other: "Thou shalt call his name John") to this: "Thou shalt be dumb and not able to speak until these things come to pass;" then we reply to him, that it is the custom of Scripture to place the former things after and the latter things before. And this is known from this very passage; for the angel said, "He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in the womb of his mother." He placed that before this. And who is so simple and foolish as to

think that after he had abstained and had been a Nazarite from wine and strong drink, he returned to the womb of his mother and was filled with the Holy Spirit, according to that which the order of the words required? Therefore it is proved that the Scripture is accustomed to place the former things after and the latter things before.

A third word; why did he not call his name John with his mouth as he wrote it on the tablet? And we say, Because he tried at this time to speak and he could not, for the angel had said two things to him; one, "Thou shalt call his name John;" and the other, "Thou shalt not be able to speak until thou hast called his name John." And therefore he was constrained by both the two: On the one side constrained and compelled him the word of the angel, "Thou shalt not be able to speak;" and on the other side constrained and compelled him the word of the angel, "Thou shalt call his name John." It was not removed from him that he should not be able to speak, and yet, if he should not be able to speak how could he call his name John? It was truly a singular experience, and not an ordinary one, which tormented Zechariah. Therefore because he was compelled by these two, he asked for a tablet and he wrote and said "His name is John." And as he wrote on the tablet he freed both of the two, "Thou shalt call his name John," and "Thou shalt not be able to speak until thou shalt have called his name John." The two then were fulfilled and served their purpose and neither of them fell to the ground. For when his hand wrote, straightway his tongue began to pronounce and just as he finished its last letter, which was *hê*, his tongue was set free and he said, "John is his name." Again, he wrote his name on the tablet because the Old Testament began in writing; as God said to Moses, "Hew for thyself two stones and write upon them the words, etc." It was proper then that the New Testament also should begin in writing and on a tablet. In the writing of the table were ten words; and here on the tablet were ten letters, "John is his name." And there Moses stuttered in speaking, here Zechariah was dumb, without speech.

A fourth word; how did Zechariah write "John," alone or the three members, thus, "John his name"? But Luke, the Evangelist, did not say so. To me is the assurance that he wrote the three

members, thus, "John his name." And this may be known from the fact that if he had written "John" alone, it would have been thought that to Zechariah was the name John due, and not to the divine agency, that which in the house of the Holy of Holies spoke and named him John. And so then if he had written, "He shall be called John," it would have been thought that the naming of John was from Zechariah. And a testimony to this is that as Elisabeth said, "He shall be called John," they said to her, "There is no man in thy family who is called by this name." Thou seest how those who heard considered that to Elisabeth was the giving of the name John and not to the divine agency. So they would have done to Zechariah also had he written, "He shall be called John." In two cases would it have been thought, then, that Zechariah named John; that is, if he had written "John;" and if he had written, "He shall be called John." It is proved therefore that Zechariah wrote three members thus, "John his name." He meant, namely: "Do not ask me concerning his name, for it is not given to me that I should name him or should give him a name: but John is his name, as he was named by the angel in the house of the Holy of Holies." Therefore those who were assembled were silent when they heard, and did not expostulate with Zechariah. For if they had not comprehended that he was thus named by the divine agency and not by Zechariah, it would have been easy to expostulate with him, "There is no man in thy family who is called by this name," as they had expostulated with Elisabeth.

A fifth word; why did not his tongue name him John, as the angel had said, instead of his hand writing it? And on this subject we will say many things. Firstly, both things happened, the hand wrote and the tongue of Zechariah named him John. Secondly, because Zechariah was the cause of this, for he had doubted, and he paid a penalty worthy of his doubting, a silence for nine months. Thirdly, because the hand was more fitting than the tongue for John, because there are five fingers on the hand and five letters in the name of John, and in that of his father Zechariah five letters. So also of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the propagators of their family, were five letters to each of their names. Fourthly, because his right hand was destined to be placed on the head of his Master. Fifthly, in

order that Zechariah might receive complete absolution that he had doubted concerning John, for there is not among the organs of sense one which is so effective in the dissipation of doubts as is the hand. And Thomas testified that until he should touch with his hand the side, his doubts would not be removed; and behold, on the eighth day after the resurrection of the Lord, Thomas was convinced. And on the eighth day, that of the circumcision of John, Zechariah was convinced. And also the Lord said in the presence of his disciples, "Touch me, and know that to a spirit are not flesh and bones as ye see are to me." Sixthly, because it typified in advance the hand of the Lord, which should be with him. And truly the hand of the Lord was with him.

A sixth word; why was John called by a foreign name, one foreign to the family of Zechariah and of Elisabeth? And we say, for many reasons. Firstly, because he was to be the messenger of a king, that one who should renew the world from of old. Therefore he was called by a new name. Secondly, he was called by a new name because he should preach new things to the Children of Israel. For he said to the people, "He who has two cloaks shall give to him who has none." And he said to the publicans, "Do not demand more than is commanded to you to demand." And he said to the soldiers, "Do not vex any man, and do not oppress any man, but let your wages be sufficient for you." Thirdly, because "John" is, interpreted, "grace;" and moreover, the New Testament, of which John was to be the representative, is full of grace. As Simeon, the old man, said, "Behold, my eyes have seen thy mercy." And the Virgin Mary said also, "And his mercy is to ages and generations on those who fear him;" and, "He hath called to memory his mercy, as he spoke with our fathers." Fourthly, because it was a great and exalted mercy, that an old man, advanced in days, and an old woman, barren and advanced in days, should bear a son.

A seventh word is necessary. For what reason was the going of John to the wilderness, and how old was he when he went to the wilderness, and from whom did he learn to speak, and how? The cause of his going to the wilderness was: as the Magi came to Judea at the time of the birth of the Lord, the Messiah, and all Jerusalem was disturbed, as it is written in the Gospel of Matthew, and Herod called

them and spoke with them and said to them, "Go, search, and when ye shall have found Him, come, show me, that I may go and worship Him," they went forth and left him and did not return again to him. And therefore he grew very angry and excited. And while he was making inquiry with the priests and the wise men, where the Messiah should be born, a man from those standing by said to him, "In our neighborhood is a certain boy, who was recently born, a son of Zechariah, the priest. And I hear from many, that they say, 'This one is the Messiah.' " And Herod sent and brought Zechariah, and he questioned him, "Where is thy son?" And he answered him, "Behold, he is at home with his mother." He said to him, "Go, bring him; and if thou bringest him not, thou shalt die a shameful death." A man from those standing by and hearing ran and informed Elisabeth, his mother. She then took John hastily in her bosom and went to the wilderness of the Ziphites. And they hid themselves there, he and she. Herod then sent Zechariah that he should bring the child, sending armed soldiers with him. As Zechariah arrived at his house he found neither John nor his mother, and he feared to return to Herod, so he went and took refuge in the temple. Herod sent then and killed him between the temple and the altar, as it is written in the Gospel of Luke and in others. Others say, John was moved by the agency of the Holy Spirit to go forth to the desert and dwell there thirty years. We say, moreover, that the going of John to the wilderness was by divine agency, in order that his testimony to the Messiah might be believed and that there should be nothing doubtful in it. So because there was a relationship between his mother and the mother of the Messiah (so that the angel said to Mary, "Behold, Elisabeth, thy cousin"), and he was destined to testify great things of the Messiah, namely, "This one is the Lamb of God;" and "Whoever does not believe in the Son of God, on Him shall the anger of God rest;" and "I have need that I should be baptized of thee," etc.; he went to the wilderness in his childhood in order that when he should come and testify of him these divine attributes, the Jews should believe, when they should see that he had been an ascetic and a Nazarite, and that he was not taken with worldly and earthly things, and that he had never known nor seen the Messiah, and that there had been to him no companionship with

him, because he had lived in the wilderness thirty years until that time when he came and testified of Him. And John also spoke thus, "And I had not known Him; but He who sent me that I should baptize with water, said to me that He on whom I should see the Spirit of God descend and rest, etc."

Therefore his going to the wilderness was for a good reason. But how many years old was he as he went? Those, on the one hand, who say that the Magi came and found the Messiah a child of two years, say that he, John, was a child of two years and a half since he preceded by six months the carnal birth of the Lord; as the angel said, "This month is the sixth to her who was called barren." Then those who say that the Magi found the Messiah a child of six months, have said that the age of John was one year when he went to the wilderness. Others say, he went a child of six months, because the Magi came and found the Messiah in swaddling clothes, it is said.

And from whom did he learn to speak? Those who say that he went out to the wilderness a child of two and a half years, say that he was already taught, for children of two and a half years stammer and also talk. Others say that he learned from his mother; still others, from the divine Providence and solicitude which were over him. And truly the hand of the Lord was with him. Others say, he learned speaking from the Holy Spirit who brooded over him in the form of the loving mother, and who brought him up and protected him from the heat of the summers and the cold of the winters.